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Abstract

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ROBERT DREWE

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I would like to comment on the confident assertion by the professor from New Delhi at this conference yesterday that Australian literary culture was moribund because we lacked myths.

That news will come as a surprise to most Australian writers. In our heads – and maybe some other anatomical parts as well – there are always two Australian myths fighting for precedence: the Myth of Landscape and the Myth of Character. For me the Myth of Landscape also divides into two opposing myths: the Bush and the Beach (or, as I think of it, the Shark versus the Dingo). The Myth of Character also separates into Fact and Gossip, but then as Stanislaw Lee says, myth is only gossip grown old anyway.

For some reason Australians seem to need the past, preferably the 19th century, to confirm for us who we are, and why. It's ironic that the professor from New Delhi should stress our myth deprivation at a time when many of us are getting a little wary of the good old past being trotted out for one more waltz.

That line of thought aside, and keeping to the post-colonial context of this conference, may I point out to the profesor from New Delhi the short existence and long cultural influence of a notorious social rebel named Ned Kelly, perhaps the one person who straddles the Australian myths of Landscape and Character.

This is a man whose name, even 115 years after his death, is still used to sell everything from bread to car mufflers to men's fashionwear; a former highwayman (and I love the irony of this) whose name proudly flogs used cars along Sydney's Parramatta Road.

May I mention my own interest in the Kelly myth? Several years ago, after reading some Jung, I began wondering about the collective unconscious of my country.

As Jungian psychology tells us, the collective unconscious is that part of the unconscious mind incorporating patterns of common memories, instincts and experiences. These patterns are inherited, may be arranged into archetypes, and are observable through their effects on our dreams and behaviour.

I wondered who, if anyone, symbolised Australia's collective unconscious, and immediately thought of Kelly, our national hero and devil incarnate. Not only did Kelly spring instantly to mind, I could think of no other possibility. And, interestingly, like all proper myths and alone of all Australians, he had an obverse – Aaron Sherritt, his

former friend who would become his nemesis and Judas figure, his Other, the moon to his sun.

I then wondered whether I could take the country's most mythologised character and create an imaginary life for him. The Kelly story had intrigued me as a boy. I'd seen his helmet, or one of the several helmets alleged to be his, among the fascinating, grisly relics – the severed arm from the Shark Arm Case, the Pyjama Girl's silk pyjamas, old murder weapons – in the police tent at the Royal Show.

The Ned Kelly as presented by the police, and accepted by the public, was three grim icons: an iron helmet, a bushy beard, a death mask. The only photograph of him unmasked or alive showed a glowering middle-aged man. It surprised me to learn later that he was only 23 and 24 when he was at large as an outlaw, and that he was dead by 25. His brother Dan and Steve Hart were teenagers; Joe Byrne was barely 21. That was not the impression put out by the authorities.

But write about him? Wasn't the myth overworked already? Hadn't Kelly, in more ways than one, been done to death.

Back in 1986 I had written a novel of ideas and politics called *Fortune* about a modern explorer who finds a sunken treasure ship off the West Australian coast and becomes, briefly, the darling of the media and a folk hero, but who then falls from grace and, after official persecution and harassment, eventually becomes a victim and is hanged.

I think that what I wrote then, just as I had created variations of other Australian myths in several other books and stories, was really glancing off our central myth, the Kelly story. So, early in 1991, I decided to have a look at it.

The Kelly file in the Mitchell Library is thick, of course. Probably the biggest file of any Australian. What surprised me was not the quantity of material but the lack of the quality. The myth had attracted film makers since 1907, and Sidney Nolan, and Arthur Boyd in his sculptor mode. There had been writers by the score, but very few good ones. The only works by serious writers to hint at an inner man were a play, *Ned Kelly*, by Douglas Stewart, and a lively biography, *Australian Son*, by the journalist Max Brown, both written in the 1940s.

The field had been left almost entirely to historians and gung-ho, hobby biographers. None of the accounts of his life had managed to extricate him from the melodramatic 19th century illustrations of Stringybark Creek and Glenrowan. Perhaps it was a measure of the myth's strength that it had survived with so few imaginative interpreters. Even so, I wasn't convinced.

While I was waiting for the librarians to bring up yet more Kellyana from the bowels of the NSW Library, I idly plucked from the tens of thousands of books in the general shelves one particular book entitled *J.W. Lindt, Master Photographer*. It was an absolutely random choice, I'd never heard of Lindt and had no reason, other than boredom, to select it. I opened it, and it actually did that thing which books do in bad novels – it fell open at a particular page. Suddenly in front of me

was this powerful and moving photograph entitled *Joe Byrne's Body on Display at Benalla*.

The caption read: 'John William Lindt, the outstanding photographer of the late 19th century, in 1880 travelled on the police train to Glenrowan with a group of reporters, artists and photographers to witness the anticipated capture of Ned Kelly and his gang. By the time the train arrived the outlaw had already escaped from Jones's Hotel, which had been set on fire to force him and his accomplices out. Joe Byrne had been killed in the siege and Steve Hart and Dan Kelly were burned beyond recognition in the fire.'

'The photograph is one of Lindt's most important images and one of the first real Press photographs. He was able to stand back from the macabre spectacle and watch the other photographers' laborious preparations. At the critical moment Lindt recorded the entire scene.'

What the other Press photographers had done was to persuade the police to hoist Joe Byrne's body up and down on a pulley in a crude imitation of life.

In the left foreground of Lindt's photograph is a portly, city-looking gent with a sketch pad under his arm. He is turning away from Byrne's body, grinning and chatting to another onlooker. The portly gent was the artist Julian Ashton, and Lindt's print is reproduced from his autobiography *Now Came Still Evening On*.

The strong impression I got is that Ashton, the middle-class painter, was saying: *There is no art in this place, among dead criminals simulating life, and country coppers and vulgar pressmen mocking up a picture. I am of course above such things.* And that the photographer, Lindt, had captured these bourgeois artistic pretensions too.

It seemed to me there were more layers to this subject than first apparent. I left the remaining Kelly files unread, and went home and began to write the novel.

The form it took owed something to a new interest, writing drama. I came to the novel literally the day after completing a play, and I saw the book in terms of a rounded drama. I decided to set the novel in the last 36 hours of the gang's freedom. The Glenrowan Inn would be the setting, and the anticipated arrival of the special police train after the killing of Aaron Sherritt would provide the suspense. Everything hinged on the outcome of this confrontation.

Meanwhile, Freud, as well as Jung, would have been happy with the *dramatis personae*. A brave, pragmatic male figure at the core, and one with something of an Oedipal fixation and a thwarted love of his father. A friend who neatly becomes the hero's Shadow, and turns Judas to boot. All overlaid with a racial and political grudge going back centuries, which is brought to a head by the removal, by Centralised Power, of the hero's mother. Ritualised murder follows. This was the stuff of Greek tragedy. Mythology, you could say ...

If a major influence was the Lindt photograph, I had a different sort of reaction to the Nolan images. Robert Melville, in his book on Nolan's

Kelly paintings, mentions a quotation from Maxim Gorky which he says helps us to see the significance of Kelly to Nolan.

'Side by side with the unhappy figure of Faust,' Gorky wrote, 'stands another character also known to every nation. In Italy he is Pulcinello, in England Punch, in Russia Petrushka. He is the invincible hero of the puppet show. He defeats everyone – the police, clergy, even death and the devil – while he himself remains immortal. In this crude and naive image the working people incarnated their own selves and their firm belief that in the long run it will be they who defeat and overcome everything and everybody.'

This is a fair interpretation of Nolan's interpretation, at least in his first Kelly series, painted in 1946-47, where Kelly is the clown, the knockabout hero of the puppet show – Australia's Petrushka.

Vital to this interpretation was the icon of the helmet, both funny and sinister, which Nolan so successfully embedded in our consciousness that artists shied away from any other Kelly image, and from the myth itself, thereafter.

For some reason it was important for me to remove the helmet and bring Kelly out into the sunlight. To do this I had to try and reinvent the myth. At no stage, however, was I in any doubt that the myth existed, or that it was the strongest one we possessed.